

## **Co-authorship, supervisory power and cronyism: the experiences of early career academics**

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### **Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### **Abstract**

This study explores the publication patterns of early career academics (ECAs) working in selected research-intensive universities in Hong Kong, Canada and the UK in a cross-national empirical study. It investigates the publication profile of assistant professors with respect to co-authorship via network analysis and semi-structured interviews. This is designed to better understand the micro-politics of co-authorship as a collaborative practice based on elite knowledge and networks. The results of the study show that four connected practices are commonplace – power gifting, power ordering, crony gifting and crony ordering. These practices embed a culture of misappropriation of authorship credit in academic life that needs to be more widely challenged and exposed as wrong rather than treated as a normalized rite of passage for ECAs.

### **Full paper**

#### Introduction

Conceptually the study builds on the literature concerning academic cronyism (eg Miller & Fox, 1998) and authorship integrity (eg Macfarlane, 2017). While academic cronyism is normally defined in relation to academic in-breeding and the appointment of academic staff (eg Horta et al, 2011), it is a phenomenon that has many other dimensions. Academic publication, and especially co-publication, lies at the heart of contemporary academic practice and represents an elite practice open to forms of behaviour that do not always conform with the ideals of international authorship standards laid down in the ICMJE (2025). While the so-called 'Vancouver protocol' originated in the bio-medical sciences in 1978, it is now applied across all academic disciplines by a large number of research-intensive universities (e.g. Aarhus University, The University of Hong

Kong, Karlstad University, Queen's University Belfast, etc). Although academic cronyism has previously been understood as an institutional practice mainly in respect to the hiring of academic staff, the study explores the effects of in-breeding on a wider network basis through co-authorship. Here, the role of research supervisors and senior academic staff at elite, research-intensive universities play an important role with strong professional and social connections existing between members of the senior professoriate in such types of institutions. These surface via publication patterns involving doctoral students and ECAs.

### Methodology

The study draws on 15 semi-structured interviews with ECAs (6 in Hong Kong, 5 in the UK, and 4 in Canada) employed in schools or faculties of education in 12 different universities in Hong Kong, Canada and the UK. Purposive sampling of ECAs took place based on the following criteria: a PhD in education or cognate disciplines obtained no more than 6 years ago; an assistant professor (or equivalent lecturer position) in a research-intensive university in Hong Kong, Canada, or in the UK; a publication record containing at least five co-authored articles in peer-reviewed journals. Methodologically the study combines the use of academic CVs to explore publications with interviewees and network analysis as a basis for better understanding authorial relationships.

### Findings

The study reveals a range of practices in respect to the micro-politics of authorship particularly with respect to authorship order and the benefits of academic networking connected with collaborative relationships between ECAs and other academics. ECAs tend to have tight network relationships with comparatively few co-authors mainly those who are their former supervisors (for masters and/or PhD), cronies of their supervisors/former supervisors and other ECAs, often networked via conference attendance. The findings further indicate that fraudulent co-authorship (by the standards of the Vancouver protocol) is embedded as a normalised element in academic practice which produces both benefits (via power and crony networking) and detriments (via gifting of authorship credit to supervisors and other more established academics) for ECAs. Abusive and fraudulent practices - power ordering, crony ordering, power gifting and crony gifting - are identified as standard constituents of authorship relationships in a conceptual model.

## Implications and conclusion

The findings from the study demonstrate the embeddedness of gifting and cronyism in co-authorship relations between doctoral supervisors, project supervisors and ECAs. They demonstrate that while ECAs appear to often be under-credited in co-authorship relations with their seniors many interpret and understand this practice as the price they have to pay in order to build an academic career via networking with influential co-authors. The findings of this study should inform institutional improvements in the education and training of ECAs. Currently the Vancouver protocol, while widely adopted internationally by both more than 5,000 journals and many research-intensive universities, is not effectively incorporated into institutional research ethics training. This research demonstrates the urgent need for this to change.